

Asia Pacific Media Educator

| Issue 4

Article 1

1-1998

Editorial: In this issue: Cultural studies and J-Education - Blending theory into practice

J. Tebutt
Monash University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme>

Recommended Citation

Tebutt, J., Editorial: In this issue: Cultural studies and J-Education - Blending theory into practice, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 4, 1998, 4-7.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss4/1>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Cultural Studies And J-Education Blending Theory Into Practice

This edition of *AsiaPacific Media Educator* features, along with other articles and reports (pp.60-105), a debate on the direction of journalism education in Australia. It revolves around the question of how academics teaching and researching journalism should deal with contemporary developments in philosophy and literary criticism -- particularly those that may be gathered under the rubric of postmodernism and what is presumed to be its home in the humanities -- cultural and media studies.

The current debate began after *The Australian's Higher Education* section published a version of Keith Windschuttle's critique "*Media's Theoretical Breakdown*" (18 March, 1998.)¹ The article was followed the next week by a flurry of responses which spilled over onto the newspaper's Web site (www.theaustralian.com.au).

The theoretical issues addressed in the debate travel beyond the Australian context. They could be seen to be influenced by migrating theories of journalism and society that have arrived from the United States. Betty Medsger's 1996 report for the Freedom Forum, *The Winds of Change: Challenges Confronting Journalism Education*, has had a significant impact on Australian journalism academics' concerns about cultural studies. Medsger's account of the repercussions from communications studies' "takeover" of journalism education in the US during the 1950s seems to haunt how some journalism academics perceive theoretical critiques which emanate from outside the profession or from academics who have not experienced the profession (Medsger; 1996, pp53-64).

Given the influence of American paradigms on teaching journalism in other countries in Asia and the Pacific it is likely to have had an impact in other teaching institutions. While cultural studies may not have formed into a specific field in most universities in the Asian and Pacific regions (with the possible exception of those

in Taiwan) it does have a place as a cross-disciplinary form of research in a number of institutions. It will be interesting to see what debates develop around its influence.²

Journalism, in its original European context, shares much with the development of the human sciences especially sociology and anthropology -- Henry Mayhew's description of London's poor in the 1800s could be claimed as a kind of prelude to the modern forms of these disciplines (see for example Mayhew, 1973) -- as well as an affinity with literature and criticism. It is not surprising then that recent critiques of these areas of scholarly endeavour would flow over into debates on the place and role of journalism in the academy (see Hartley, 1996). The fact that these critiques have been generated from concerns about the tendency of the humanities to totalise analysis and universalise experience -- and so the complicity of human sciences with intellectual and economic colonialism as well as their role in establishing civil and administrative benchmarks -- makes it all the more important for a journal such as APME to address the issues.

It is noteworthy that one of the main criticisms of Windschuttle's position from our contributors is that he totalises a kind of insidious postmodernism. Martin Hirst provides a useful review of the issues raised in his qualified defence of Windschuttle's position. However, Cathy Greenfield and Peter Williams point out the weaknesses of Windschuttle's arguments as he attempts to claim a high ground for what he sees as the principles of good journalism. Julia Ravell and Warwick Blood in different ways suggest the diversity that cultural analysis offers and how it may relate to journalism.

It may be that Australian journalism courses and those that teach them are particularly prone to this form of categorising theories as those that operate "within" journalism and those that operate from "without".

The majority of journalism courses in Australia started out as vocational diplomas in institutions that were outside the university system. These institutions were amalgamated with universities, or became universities, during educational reforms in the late 1980s. Consequently journalism courses became part of the curricula which previously were primarily concerned with non-vocational degrees.

At the same time, Australian universities came under increasing pressure to design courses that were more relevant to the labor market through changes in government support which provided money according to the numbers of students universities attracted rather than block funding for research and teaching.

A number of the contributions to APME raise the issue of the relationship between university practices and professional competencies. Roger Patching gives a testimonial support to

Windschuttle and at the same time outlines specific instance of the conflict between media studies and journalism at his institution. Wendy Bacon also addressees the practice of teaching journalism but draws connections with cultural analysis generally. Overall the debate as presented in this issue testifies to the diversity within the journalism education sector in Australia.

Fifteen years ago, Michel Foucault said in response to an interviewer who wanted to connect his work with postmodernism: "What are we calling postmodernity? I'm not up to date." (Foucault; 1983). Postmodernism or cultural studies or media studies are not, in the end, the issue. They will all play a role in the mix of theories and approaches that inform the practice of journalism academics in Australia and elsewhere. Constructing the general problem as these forms of "outside" theories impacting on journalism education diverts analysis away from political and aesthetic particularities of Australian journalism and into the entrenched positions of the "media wars". While this may work as a kind of "branding" in a competitive commercial environment, it has to be asked whether it is in the best interests of journalism as an academic discipline or a profession.

This debate occurs at an important conjuncture for journalism in Australia. With the rationalisation of outlets and the introduction of increasingly technologised systems that bypass traditional sub-editing and layout functions, employers require and demand more highly educated applicants. Graduates with professional qualifications (particularly law, education/teaching or communication/journalism) have an advantage as in-house training, through the cadet system which is expensive in terms of an organisation's time and resources, is wound down. University educated journalists are coming to dominate in newsrooms while editors are increasingly required to be managers and marketers.

It is important that Australian journalism educators and cultural/media theorists can find a way around positional impasses that can often dog periods of change and uncertainty in intellectual arenas. The real issue is what resources can we draw to our teaching and research so that, if I can put it starkly, journalists of the future don't simply become information clerks and functionaries while managers, beholden to "the market", oversee the implementation of commercial and government public relations. ■

NOTES

1. The article, *"The Poverty of Media Theory"*, had early lives as a 1995 conference paper presented at the annual Journalism Education

Association (JEA) national conference and in the March, 1998 edition of commentary magazine, *Quadrant* (pp 11-18).

2. While the phrase "cultural studies" has limited currency in Asia there has been some debate on the place of postmodernism as well as media and communication theory. See for example *Sojourn* editions for October 1994, Vol.9 No. 2, *Mass Media; Local and Global Positions*, eds: Zaharom Nain and Yao Souchou; and April 1995, Vol.10 No.1, *Postmodernism and Southeast Asian Scholarship*, ed: Janadas Devan, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore. The Asian Media and Information Centre's (AMIC) journal *Media Asia* often has articles on journalism and media with an empirical, communication studies focus.

REFERENCES

- The Australian (1998), Higher Education Supplement, 25 March: 41.
- Mayhew, Henry (1973), *The Unknown Mayhew; Selections from the Morning Chronicle 1849-50*, eds: E.P. Thompson and Eileen Yeo, Penguin, Ringwood, Vic.
- Hartley, J. (1996). *Popular Reality: Journalism, Modernity, Popular Culture*. Arnold: London.
- Medsger, Betty (1996), *Winds of change; Challenges Confronting Journalism Education*, Freedom Forum, Arlington, Virginia.
- Foucault, Michel (1983), Interview with Gérard Raulet, trans; Jeremy Harding, *Telos*, 16:55 pp195 -211. For a reprint of the interview with an amended translation can see Foucault (1998), *Structuralism and Poststructuralism*, in *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology; The Essential Works of Foucault*, Vol. 2 ed; James D. Faubion, New Press, New York.
- Windschuttle, K. (1998). "Media's theoretical breakdown". *The Australian Higher Education Supplement*, 18 March: pp. 41,42,43.

JOHN TEBBUTT is Founding Lecturer in Journalism at Monash University - Gippsland in Victoria where he has been teaching since 1996. He is author of several book chapters and articles on journalism and history. He is currently completing his doctoral thesis on Australian journalists in Asia (1945-65). Email: john.tebbutt@arts.monash.edu.au
